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ORATION,

DELIVERED BEFORE

The Adelpbic Union Society

OF

WILLIAMS COLLEGE,

ON

THE EVENING PRECEDING THE COMMENCEMENT,

SEPT. 5, 1826.



BY JOHN NELSON,
MINISTER OF LEICESTER.



WORCESTER :

PRINTED BY WILLIAM MANNING.

At a Meeting of THE ADELPHIC UNION SOCIETY of Williams College, on the sixth of September, 1826—

Voted, That A. D. WHEELER, B. PHINNEY, and J. BALLARD present to the Rev. JOHN NELSON the thanks of the Society for his Address, and request a copy of the same for the press.

Attest,

O. TINKER, *Secretary.*

ORATION.

IT is a peculiar happiness to find myself again in the presence of this "Alma Mater," whose memory I have never ceased to cherish, and in intimate fellowship with so many of her sons, now assembled, under the appropriate name of THE ADELPHIC UNION. There is one reflection, it is true, which throws a shade of melancholy over the occasion. Some, who were members and ornaments of this Society, I well know, are sleeping in their graves; and many more are too widely scattered to be re-assembled in this world.

But I would not forget that I am called to a higher duty than that of giving expression to those personal emotions, which the present hour, with its thousand recollections, is so busy in creating. I stand, if not on holy ground, yet on that which has been most piously consecrated to learning and religion. I have the honour to address an association of men whose minds have been formed in the halls of science, and whose lips have been touched, at least, with Castalian dews.

Perhaps I ought to apologize for saying, in *this place*, that learning, by which I mean the varied acquisitions of a cultivated intellect, is pre-eminently the gift of God—a portion of the Divine intelligence infused into an earth-born creature—an engine of power, fitted and designed to act beneficially on whatever mass of human beings falls within the circle of its influence.

What if this gift has sometimes been perverted to unworthy purposes? What if it has been brought, in different ages, into a most unnatural alliance with magic, astrology, and superstition? What if the priests of Egypt, the brahmins of Hindostan, and the monks of Rome, have each, in turn, made it the instrument of establishing their own power, and of holding the rest of mankind in spiritual bondage? What if it has been pressed into the service of infidelity, and made, unwillingly, to supply the weapons of its unholy warfare against the religion of Christ? What if it has given a magic charm to a genius like Byron's, and thus become the vehicle of conveying far and wide the poison which rankles in the dark and misanthropic bosom? These instances of the *abuse* of learning only show its *power*, and its capabilities of blessing mankind, when permitted to act, not in alliance with unholy passions, but with the pure, the generous, and the godlike spirit of Christianity. The names of an *Erasmus*, whose writings added lustre to genius, and at the same time prepared the way for the master spirits of the Reformation to enter successfully on the field of their labours,—of a *Ba-*

con, whose fearless researches into the arcana of nature dissolved the death-like spell of the ancient philosophy,—and of a *Newton*, whose intellect soared aloft among the orbs of heaven, or descended to the centre, to ascertain the laws which govern this material universe.—These, and a host of others, suggest to us at once examples of powerful intellect and splendid acquisitions, that were made to act with the best effect on the highest interests of man. They *blessed*, at the same time they *ennobled* the species that produced them. Much of their light, indeed, was borrowed from the Sun of Righteousness; but, on this account, it did not less adorn or beautify the moral creation on which it cast its blended beams.

What important improvement in the intellectual, social, or moral state of man has ever been carried forward without the powerful aid of learning? Will it be said, that the propagation of the gospel by illiterate fishermen furnishes an instance? My reply is, that instance was too manifestly supernatural to be adduced as a precedent; for there, miracles took the place of education, and the endowments of the Holy Ghost more than supplied the defects of learning.

It is much more pertinent to inquire how Martin Luther and his immortal coadjutors could have withstood the usurpations of Rome, if they had not been furnished with learning, to confound the subtleties of her partizans, to convey to a benighted populace, in their own vernacular tongue, the oracles of God, and thus to throw

the broad light of heaven on the abominations of the mystical Babylon.

How, too, would the revolution which severed these Colonies from the mother country, and which seems designed in providence to exert such a mighty influence on the future destinies of the world, have been sustained or consummated, if the actors in that drama had not brought to their work the lights of learning? There might, indeed, have been heard the murmurs of conscious oppression; but had there been no master spirits, imbued with Greek and Roman and *British* lore, to direct that raging storm, can it be doubted that the genius of colonial dependence would still brood over this same land, which is now the brightest and loveliest inheritance of freedom?

The untutored intellect, as much as it may astonish us by its native grandeur, usually expends its force in savage valour, and the terrific deeds of the warrior. It acts, indeed, upon society; but, like the tornado, is followed by a track of desolation; or, like the mountain torrent, it rushes down with nature's ruins. But, with the full advantages of scientific and moral culture, the tornado is changed into the healthful breeze of morning, and the mountain torrent into the gentle stream which spreads beauty and fertility over the face of nature.

It is a remark, however, which experience fully warrants, that the influence of learning and of learned men upon any age, depends, essentially, upon the circumstances of that age. And I have

thought it might meet the demands of the occasion, and serve, perhaps, to quicken scholars to greater diligence, if we should glance at some of the peculiar advantages of the present above any former age, both for calling into vigorous action the powers of the human mind, and for diffusing over society the benefits of useful knowledge.

But a few centuries have gone by, since the intellectual energies of man were paralyzed by superstition. The little learning which existed in the world was almost exclusively confined to the cells of the monastery; and it was there clogged and almost stifled by the jargon of the schools, by a philosophy as remote from utility as it was from common sense. The church, then in the full exercise of her proud domination, maintained a much sterner censorship over the *opinions* than over the *morals* of men. To think, to speak, or to write, except according to her absurd dogmas, was a deadly heresy. Thus all the fountains of learning were dried up or polluted. No channels of communication were open, or none which could convey the healthful waters to any considerable portion of society. If a powerful genius sometimes broke away from their restraints,—if a Galileo, borne onward by the energies of his mind, was able to send forth a purified vision over the works of God, and settle on an immutable basis the true theory of the universe, he was made to pay dearly for the rashness of his discoveries in the gloomy prison of the inquisition. At the same

time, the despotism of civil rulers concurred with the superstition of the priesthood to keep mankind in ignorance, or at least to prevent that diffusion of knowledge which might endanger the foundations of their own authority. There was a jealous eye to watch, and a strong arm to punish the presumption of any one who should dare to advance opinions, which, by any construction, might be deemed incompatible with the divine right of Kings, or the dominion of the Roman See. This gloomy and blighting despotism presided in the halls of learning, and followed with its terrors the solitary author to the retirement of his study. A school for general education would *then* have been deemed the greatest of all evils, unless we except the reading of a bible, or the offering of a prayer in a language which the supplicant, by any possibility, could understand. But in the present age, by the operation of causes which I have not time to enumerate, society has, in a great measure outgrown this intellectual bondage. Mind, to a wide extent, has asserted her unalienable rights, and now walks forth in the majesty and strength of her own freedom. Not that superstition or despotism are driven from the earth—not that Rome has become truly reconciled to the progress of knowledge—not that the potentates of Europe, now in alliance, and for objects whose turpitude can be equalled by nothing but the impiety of calling them Holy, are tolerant of the spirit and improvements of the age; but the spirit and improvements of the age have become too powerful for them.

In the more favoured portions of Europe, and in our country, especially, the man of letters is left free to range over the field of his labours, unappalled by the mitre or the crown. The fountains of education are now open—the press is free, and comparatively few barriers to knowledge remain, except the limited capacities of the human understanding. There are powerful stimulants also to excite and animate the scholar in his intellectual pursuits. The actors of the present age have so far outgrown their pupilage as to take the great interests of society into their own hands. They have chosen, in a measure, to be the arbiters of their own destiny, to think and to act for themselves. Hence talents and mental endowments are brought into use, and have become a passport to those stations of honour and of influence, which were once monopolized by the privileged orders.

But this is not the only change in the character of the age favourable to learning and the influence of learned men. The energies of society are not now as formerly expended in the feats of chivalry and the profession of arms. The feudal lord, who could neither read nor write, but who gloried in the bloody trophies of an ancestry as proud and as ignorant as himself, or in the success of his own prowess against a rival chieftain, has given place to the truer nobility of intellect. The age has transferred its honours from the warrior to the scholar. It has decided that mind shall be the measure of the man, and not the strength of

his arm. The youth is awakened to action by the rewards of scientific and literary excellence, not by the meteor of military renown. To think, has, at length, become more honourable than to fight.

The learning of the age, too, is much relieved from the authority of names, and from its blind veneration for long established opinions. As it has increased in strength and stature, it has increased also in independence. One system is not retained because it is ancient, nor is another set aside because it is new. Innovation is no longer dreaded as dangerous, nor is error deemed sacred because it has long been maintained. The age has detected imposition, and is resolved to take nothing more upon trust. It demands arguments and reasons instead of authorities. Every new discovery is sure to be attended to, and ultimately to stand or fall on its own merits.

This spirit of independent inquiry, it is true, has run into some excesses. In religion, especially, it has touched, with an unhallowed hand, the sanctities of revealed truth; and, in some cases, set up the arrogance of reason above the oracles of God. But we have no fears, that either learning or religion will suffer, in the end, from this spirit of the age; for truth stands on her own immoveable basis, and asks no indulgence but the *opportunity* of making good her claims.

The learning of the age, too, is more practical than formerly, and more readily accommodates

itself to the business of life. It no longer sits as a recluse in the cloisters of a convent, nor struts forth in the drapery of the schools merely to be admired, nor displays its pedantry in massy folios, designed more to perpetuate the fame of their authors than to benefit mankind. The age has made the discovery, and it is a most important one, that learning is not incompatible with common sense, and that it loses nothing of its dignity by being made subservient to what is useful. It has at length come home to the business of men. It acts directly and powerfully on every department of human industry. It follows out life in all the details of its occupation. It enters the mechanic's shop, and goes with the agriculturalist to the labours of the field. It gives new beauty to nature, and new perfection to art. And last, though not least, the learning of the age enjoys peculiar advantages for the diffusion of its benefits.

There was a time, when the productions of genius could be communicated to mankind only by being read to some popular assembly, or by such an expense of time and labour in transcribing, that the rich only could procure a copy. But now, by the astonishing improvements in the art of printing, the press has become a medium through which the thoughts and discoveries of the learned may be made to act on the whole mass of the reading community. The creations of any one mind are easily brought in contact with a million of other minds. The writings of the learned are only to be committed to the

press, and they become, at once, a common property and a common benefit.

It is a circumstance, too, of the greatest importance as it respects the diffusion of knowledge, that men of letters have far more intercourse now than in any former age. The business of *translating*, so little understood and so rarely practised by the ancients, has overcome, in a great measure, the chief barrier to such intercourse, difference of language. At the same time, the progress of navigation has brought distant nations comparatively near to each other, and created a thousand facilities for interchanging the sympathies, the labours, and improvements of learned men. Literary journals multiplied and increased a thousand fold—books on all subjects, whether moral, literary or scientific, pass from nation to nation, as if distance, and geographical limits, and diversities of tongues were abolished together. Let the thoughts of a powerful mind be put on paper—let that paper pass through the press—let the multiplied copies which are thus produced be committed to the rapid circulation of the post-office,—and a whole continent will feel its influence in a shorter period than was once occupied in transcribing a single copy of Homer's *Iliad*. In the mean time, this same production, if it bear the stamp of distinguished merit, is conveyed on the wings of commerce to distant nations, and is soon added to the general stock of human intelligence.

But I must dwell no longer on this animating theme. If so hasty a view of the happy auspices

of the age, as it respects the great cause of human improvement, shall awaken in the minds of scholars a sense of obligation, in any measure proportioned to their advantages, I shall thus far have accomplished my object. And, notwithstanding the greater demand for labour and literary enterprize, which, it must be confessed, these advantages bring with them, I deem it a privilege to live in such an age, and to participate in its *toils* as well as in the *glory* of its achievements. It awakens a feeling of exultation, not unmixed, I hope, with gratitude, that our lot has fallen in a period of the world so favourable, beyond all former example, for imparting vigour and activity to the human mind, for augmenting the stock of human intelligence, and for diffusing over the whole face of society the benign influences of that intelligence.

I deem it a privilege too, to live in such a *country*, as well as in such an age—a country respecting which it is no idle boast to say, the light of heaven shines not upon another, in which these advantages are so richly enjoyed. But it is a truth, which, if it were possible, I would utter with a voice that should reach every seminary of learning, and thrill through the multiplied departments of every profession, that the preservation of all that is dear to the patriot or the scholar, in the circumstances of our country, depends, under God, on the healthful vigour of that undefined but powerful agent which we denominate public sentiment. This is the vital principle, the living and animating soul of our body politic. And to

sustain this, to direct and carry forward its energies, creates the largest demand on the efforts of learned men. Theirs is the prerogative and the high responsibility of guarding the interests of a Republic, which is fast expanding on every side, and growing up to a stature whose magnitude astonishes mankind. Here, if any where, then, is a call for the most *active exertion* on the part of scholars. The vastness of the objects which engage attention, the boundless scope which is given for every species of intellectual effort, and the unexampled facilities which are furnished for infusing light, and truth, and virtuous sentiment into the mass of the community, are sufficient, one would think, to rouse the most sluggish spirit.

Let the monk, whom the church confines to a little round of prescribed duties—let the poet-laureate of a corrupt court, whose pension is the reward of his sycophancy—let the patroned pageant of a great man's table repose, if they will, in learned ease; but let not the stigma of indolence attach itself to the scholars of a Republic, to gifted men, whom the providence of God has inseparably connected with the destinies of their country—let there be no drones here, who content themselves with the honours and emoluments of the hive, without labouring for the public weal—let there be no minds inactive, no hearts indifferent, no hands idle, when the growth of a nation, from its infancy to its manhood, is so rapid as to create an unparalleled demand for intellectual and moral culture.

Can it be forgotten that every seminary of learning, from the highest to the lowest, from the university to the village school, demands the most liberal patronage and the most efficient aid of scholars? By increasing and purifying these fountains, we send forth upon society perennial streams of light and of intelligence—we produce the greatest amount of good by the least expense of means—we bring the most powerful moral machine to bear directly and beneficially on all that is good, or great, or interesting in the destinies of our Republic.

Or, can it be forgotten, that through the medium of the press, too, so constantly employed in sending forth its books and journals, to instruct or amuse the public mind, every American scholar may, if he will, contribute to the common stock of improvement? These books and journals multiplied, beyond all former example, will, of course, exert an immense influence upon a community, where they are so eagerly sought for and so promptly read. They will disseminate, through the whole extent of their circulation, the seeds of life or the seeds of death. But, while through these channels, so free to all, we may hope the instructions of wisdom will continue to flow, it is *too much* to hope, that the salutary streams will be unmingled with the waters of pollution. So long as the press is free, the aspirant for office will there send forth the disgusting pretensions of his ambition, or the ravings of his disappointment; and the apostle of infidelity will there assail all that is sacred in religion, and all that is

venerable in the institutions of society; and, at the same time, unblushing profligacy will there try her powers of enchantment to corrupt the youthful mind, and to fix upon it the impress of her own deformity. Surely, then, every patriotic and every Christian scholar will feel himself bound by no ordinary considerations of duty to put forth his utmost strength, that he may turn back this tide of corruption—that he may purify society from its defilement—that he may preserve the healthful tone of its sentiments and feeling, by throwing upon it the multiplied efforts of genius, guided and sanctified by religion, and rendered powerful by being baptized into the name of Jesus of Nazareth.

In this age, and in this country, men *will* read, and let them read—God forbid they should not: but I call upon American scholars to see to it that our literary productions are of such a character as shall secure the soundness of the body politic. To them is committed, in an important sense, the guardianship of the press; and tremendous will be their responsibility, if found unfaithful to such a trust. Posterity will demand of them a fearful reparation for the injuries that shall result from their negligence. The world will point them out as the unfaithful stewards, who left the fairest heritage of man to become a prey to the destroyer.

But there is another consideration, which must, I think, address itself to American scholars with no ordinary force. Our country, it will be impossible to forget, is the great exemplar of ration-

al liberty. This richest temporal boon of Heaven's munificence to man was long the object of implacable hostility to the successive dynasties of the old world. It was pursued by them, with fire and sword, through every vale, and over every mountain top, till no retreat was left, except that little island to which we owe our origin. There the scattered puritans, amid wrongs and sufferings innumerable, cherished a few blighted germs of this tree of political and social life, some of which Providence designed should remain there to bless a coming age; but the fairest, the firmest, and the best was borne by the Mayflower to the rock of Plymouth, and planted on the margin of a boundless wilderness; and, thanks be to God, it did not perish. No: but, watered by the tears, and consecrated by the prayers of the pilgrims, and reared up as by the hand of Heaven, it took deep root, and sent forth its branches to the sea, and its boughs unto the river. Or, to drop the figure, our country, in the progress of two centuries only, has attained to a magnitude and glory which astonishes mankind. And the admiration is called forth, not so much by the extent of its territory, the vastness of its resources, the grandeur of its natural scenery, or the strength of its arm, as by the developments of that liberty which breathes through all her institutions, pervades all her social habits, and directs all the mighty movements of her resistless enterprize and her boundless prosperity.

Such an *example* is of greater importance to the world, toiling and groaning under the usurpations

of a false religion and the galling yoke of despotism, than I can find language to express. It is a sun in the political heavens, whose beams *do* and *will* penetrate through the impending darkness. Already has it acted as a renovating power on the southern half of our continent, awakening its provinces from the long slumber of colonial bondage, and leading them onward to freedom and independence. Already has it sent forth its influence across the wide waters, to electrify the monarchies of Europe, and to inspire the friends of liberty there with new confidence and new hope. I trust that the work of emancipation, thus begun, will proceed onward and onward, till the mitre and the crown, the altar of superstition and the throne of despotism shall crumble together in the dust.

But whether or not these sublime anticipations shall be realized, depends, essentially, on the *example* which our country is now exhibiting to the world. This is the last and the great experiment of freedom. This is the argument which is to refute the long acknowledged pretensions of despotic rule, and to convince mankind that free institutions alone can secure to them their highest prosperity and their truest happiness. But by whom is this example, so important in its influences, to be sustained? By whom is it to be carried forward with increasing majesty and power, if not by those who are qualified by their talents and learning to preserve the full energy of that lofty tone of virtuous freedom in which it originated?

I call, then, upon the scholars, upon the gifted men of our Republic, not merely by the spirit of the age, not merely by the memory of an ancestry who laid, in blood, the foundations of their empire, not merely by their regard to the future millions who are to inhabit this wide continent—but by the wrongs of an oppressed world, by the abused rights of humanity, by whatever is odious in usurpation or sacred in liberty, to guard with unceasing vigilance the momentous trust committed to them, that example of *free institutions*, whose silent but powerful influence seems designed in providence to become the genius of universal emancipation. I call upon the scholars and learned men of our country, to bear in mind that they hold a most important relation to a Republic, on whose unexampled prosperity the eyes of mankind are fixed with intense interest, and on whose success or failure depends the destiny of unnumbered millions of the human family.

But I shall not feel that I have discharged the duty imposed on me, on this occasion, without calling the attention of scholars to the still higher and more sacred obligations which they owe to the religion of the gospel. This religion, corrupted and perverted as it doubtless was by the superstition of the age, was still the only guardian of learning, through that long night which preceded the Reformation, and it has been its best protector and its most efficient ally, in every subsequent age. This religion was the principle which inspired the pilgrims with all that is great in purpose, and all that is heroic in suffering or in ac-

tion. It awakened, sustained and consecrated their matchless efforts; and it armed them with that firmness of resolution, which no dangers could appal, nor difficulties overcome. And this religion, from the time the first knee was bent on the rock of Plymouth, in Christian devotion, to the present hour, has been the guardian angel of our Republic! Her ministry, her temples of worship, and her continued influence upon our schools of learning, are the mighty springs, the all-powerful causes of our prosperity. No scholar, I am sure, no man, of reading and reflection will deny this, except from the influence of a heart that has been poisoned by infidelity. Suppose, for a moment, that the Sun of Righteousness should be blotted from our heavens, that the bible should be abolished, that the Sabbath should be converted into a common day, that the temple and the altar should sink together; and suppose that fifty years should pass over us, thus destitute of the light of life,—and who can think, without shuddering, on what must then be the condition of our country?

But we feel, perhaps, that there is no reason to apprehend such a catastrophe. In New-England, I trust in God, there is none. But turn your eye to the vast territories of the south and the west—mark the tide of population that is rolling over that wilderness—contemplate the villages, towns, States, and I might almost say nations, which are there springing up, as by the power of enchantment; and remember that these multitudes compose a part of our country—that they

furnish legislators for the older territories—and that, by their increasing majorities, they will soon give a decided character to our government.—Keep in view all this, and it will be impossible to doubt, that unless we send forth, with this flowing stream of our new settlements, the healing influences of the gospel—unless we accompany them, in their rapid march, with Christian institutions, a flood of infidelity will, ere long, roll back upon us, tainting our national councils, and extending a deleterious influence through all the ramifications of society. Connected as the parts of our Republic are by a common bond of national confederacy, there will of course be an amalgamation of character; and how necessary it is, that truth and righteousness should constitute the predominating ingredients, I surely need not labour to prove.

As patriots, then, bound by the ties of gratitude to a pious ancestry, and most sincerely desirous of transmitting unimpaired to future generations our invaluable privileges, every American scholar, if not lost to gratitude, and blind to the source of his richest blessings, must feel himself sacredly pledged to the cause of our holy religion.

And there is still another consideration, which gives additional urgency to this highest and noblest enterprize of learning, for which we now plead.

Christianity, I do not hesitate to affirm, is the only agent which will be able to terminate the reign of despotism, and to diffuse over the earth the blessings of peace, of good government, and of rational liberty. Aside from this, the projects

of statesmen are foolishness, and revolution is like the movings of the ocean when, it casts up mire and dirt.

France exulted over the ruins of her Bastile, demolished the throne of her Bourbons, and sent forth the loud notes of freedom. But France gained no valuable object; because the spirit of the gospel did not pervade her councils, nor purify the elements of her political being. There was no angel of the covenant, to ride upon that whirlwind and to direct that revolutionary storm.

Spain needed a constitution, but she needed a bible more. She could not profit by the recent change in her government, because her energies were paralyzed by remaining darkness and superstition. Pour upon that degraded country the light of the gospel, give her the religion of the bible, and neither the cry of legitimacy nor the frowns of the Holy Alliance will be able to hold her in bondage.

History authorizes us to say, that the march of freedom will keep pace with the march of truth. Philosophers may dream—theorists may publish their predictions, and statesmen may lay down on paper their mighty schemes of improvement; but never, till the angel flying through the midst of heaven shall preach the gospel to every creature, will man be truly free.

But the hour and the continued exercises of the evening remind me, that the audience must already seek repose. Thus time is always bearing us onward on rapid wings. The labours of the scholar, as well as of the man of ordinary at-

tainments, are crowded into the short span of human life; and whatever is done, for ourselves, or for mankind, must be quickly done. I have said, that the busy and excited character of the age—that the great and still growing interests of our Republic—that the cause of liberty, of humanity and religion, press upon scholars a powerful call to duty. And surely, minds which are duly formed, which kindle and glow by the inspirations of learning, and which, in any measure, feel the more sacred influence that breathes peace on earth and good will towards men, will not be insensible to such a call.

Associates of the Adelpic Union! we have assembled, on this truly happy occasion, to renew the covenant of our sympathies and affections, and to tender another pledge of fidelity to this venerable seat of learning.

Wherever we go, and in whatever sphere Providence shall call us to act, we will remember Williams College—we will remember these halls and these lecture-rooms, in which our minds received their best endowments. Whether weal or wo attend our steps, in life's dubious pilgrimage—whether honours gather around us, or our names sink into forgetfulness, we will remember these scenes of our youth—we will remember this lovely vale, retired from the noise and glare of crowded life, and surrounded by those bolder works of nature, which seem to mark out the spot as a retreat for the muses, and as fitted for the loftiest conceptions of genius. We will remember *thee*, Alma Mater—in all thy prosperity

we will rejoice, and in all thy affliction we will be sorrowful—we will engrave thy name on the palms of our hands, and thy honour shall be sacred in our keeping.

And amid the solemn as well as joyful recollections, which crowd upon the mind at this hour, will it be deemed too serious to invoke for ourselves, as scholars and as gifted men, that hallowed influence from above, which shall sanctify our labours—which shall preserve us from the allurements of pleasure, the cravings of avarice, and the aspirings of ambition—and which, when the scenes of earth, its grandeur and its loveliness shall fade from our view, and these bodies shall become kindred dust with those of our brethren whose graves we have moistened with our tears, shall raise our emancipated spirits to loftier flights, and to purer and holier conceptions, in the paradise of God!









